

Dogwood, Longleaf Pine, Plott Hound, Channel Bass, Gray Squirrel...and Stock Car Racing?

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As you have studied the history of North Carolina, you may have learned that everything listed at the beginning of this article's title is an official state symbol. But you might not know that North Carolina now has an official state sport, too: stock car racing.

Perhaps the most interesting part about the naming of a state sport? The movement began among students like you in 2009 at Lake Norman Elementary School in Mooresville. Under the guidance of teacher Nettie Gambill, a group of students researched the history and importance of stock car racing to their community and to the state. The students—known as the Pit Crew—presented their findings to the public and to local officials. They traveled to Raleigh to present their case to legislators and eagerly watched the introduction of a bill to honor the sport. After both houses of the General Assembly approved the measure, Governor Beverly Perdue signed it into law June 21, 2011, at Charlotte Motor Speedway.

Why Stock Car Racing?

North Carolina boasts outstanding college basketball; deep traditions in baseball, football, and golf; and a Stanley Cup–winning professional hockey team. So why would stock car racing be the official state sport?

The answer is simple. While millions of Tar Heels enjoy and compete in those other sports, they all started somewhere else. North Carolina has the deepest historical connections to the beginnings of stock car racing than any state in the nation. It has produced more top drivers, mechanics, promoters, and track owners. North Carolina remains the center of the stock car business. You cannot say that about any other sport.

North Carolina and Stock Car Racing History

In the words of racing legend Richard Petty, of Level Cross, the first stock car race took place as soon as “the second cat got a car.” Stock cars are racing vehicles that—especially in the sport's early days—are just like the cars driven by ordinary people on the street (at least on the outside). Organized, professional races began in the 1930s and 1940s throughout the southeastern United States. Fairgrounds tracks in Salisbury, Charlotte, Greensboro, and High Point hosted early contests.

After World War II, North Carolina became the center of the stock car world. Several factors made the Tar Heel State a hotbed for the sport. For one thing, North Carolina produced an unusual number of talented drivers. Many of them got their first taste of high-speed driving

behind the wheel of a V-8 Ford loaded down with illegally produced moonshine whiskey, as they tried to outrun federal revenue collectors. The Piedmont region's red clay provided a natural surface for early racetracks. And large numbers of the state's farmers and mill workers eagerly crowded grandstands to watch racing.

Race promoter "Big Bill" France quickly recognized how popular the sport was becoming in North Carolina. Soon after the war, the Florida man began promoting races from his summer base in Winston-Salem. Before long, he founded the National Association for Stock Car Auto Racing (NASCAR, now the largest organizer of stock car competition in the world). In the late 1940s, some of the most important tracks in the sport's history were built in North Carolina.

Enoch Staley and Charlie Combs built the first of them, North Wilkesboro. Tracks at Charlotte, Hillsborough, Elkin, Raleigh, Winston-Salem, Gastonia, Hickory, and Weaverville soon followed. Most counties in the state—especially in the Piedmont—boasted of at least one track hosting weekly stock car racing and at least one annual race sanctioned by France's new NASCAR organization by the early 1950s.

It was no accident that when France decided to launch the top competitive division in NASCAR (what is known today as Sprint Cup racing), he held the first event in North Carolina. That first 1949 race at the old Charlotte Speedway drew a huge crowd that totally blocked nearby Wilkinson Boulevard. It helped cement North Carolina's position in the sport. In the 1940s and 1950s, North Carolina hosted more NASCAR races by far than any other state.

While some of its tracks began disappearing by the 1960s, the Tar Heel State retained and solidified its importance. Some of its older dirt track facilities, such as North Wilkesboro, Hickory, and Asheville-Weaverville, were expanded, paved, and updated. In 1961 came the construction of a world-class superspeedway: Charlotte Motor Speedway in Concord, Cabarrus County. And many of NASCAR's top race teams decided to locate in the Charlotte area.

Tar Heel State Racing Legends

Perhaps nothing makes the Tar Heel State more important in NASCAR history than the legends of the sport born and bred there. The NASCAR Hall of Fame in Charlotte has inducted 10 members so far. Five are native North Carolinians.

Richard Petty (b. 1937) won 200 races in NASCAR's top division, seven championships, and many other honors in a driving career that lasted from 1958 to 1992. The only driver who has matched Petty's championship record is Kannapolis native Dale Earnhardt Sr. (1951–2001), who captured his record-tying seventh title in 1994. These two popular superstars did more than win a lot of races. They played important roles in carrying NASCAR from its roots in the Southeast to a national and international audience.

Colorful Wilkes County native Junior Johnson (b. 1931) joined Petty and Earnhardt in the first class of inductees to the hall of fame. Johnson started his driving career hauling

moonshine over the highways of the foothills and Piedmont region. In the 1950s he became one of the sport's biggest stars. After retiring as a driver, he enjoyed a 30-year career as one of the sport's most influential mechanics and car owners.

Ned Jarrett (b. 1932) and Lee Petty (1914–2000)—Richard's father—also affected stock car racing in a variety of ways. They joined the NASCAR Hall of Fame in 2011. Jarrett, of Newton, won two NASCAR championships, and Lee Petty won three. Jarrett went on to become a successful track owner and promoter. He was an important, pioneering NASCAR radio and television broadcaster. Lee Petty launched one of the most successful teams—Petty Enterprises—in the sport's history. He started a racing dynasty that has spanned four generations so far.

Future NASCAR Hall of Fame inductions may include other North Carolina racing legends such as drivers Herb Thomas, Rex White, Bobby Isaac, Jack Ingram, Buddy Baker, Benny Parsons, Harry Gant, and Dale Jarrett; racetrack builders and owners Staley, Combs, and O. Bruton Smith; mechanics Banjo Matthews and Buddy Shuman; and promoter H. A. "Humpy" Wheeler, to name but a few.

Stock Car Racing and North Carolina Today

North Carolina remains closely tied to stock car racing and NASCAR. Current Sprint Cup drivers Dale Earnhardt Jr. and Brian Vickers are North Carolina natives. Most of the top drivers own homes in the state. Charlotte Motor Speedway hosts three of the biggest weekends on the schedule, with two Nationwide Series races, two Sprint Cup Series races, and the annual Sprint Cup All-Star race. Ninety percent of the race teams' shops can be found in North Carolina. Stock car racing generates billions of dollars of income to the state and provides over 25,000 jobs. NASCAR chose Charlotte in 2006 as the home of its 150,000-square-foot hall of fame because of the sport's roots and continued importance in the state. The facility opened in May 2010.

Perhaps most significantly, the spirit of stock car racing that has made the sport meaningful to so many people remains alive at tracks scattered throughout the state. If you have never visited one, you should. Get your parents to take you out for an evening at Carraway Speedway, Bowman Gray Stadium, East Lincoln Speedway, Orange County Speedway, Hickory Motor Speedway, Fayetteville Motor Speedway, or any of the other great smaller tracks. Celebrate stock car racing as North Carolina's official state sport!

**At the time of this article's publication, Daniel S. Pierce was professor of history at the University of North Carolina at Asheville, where he was teaching courses on North Carolina, southern, Appalachian, and environmental history. His many publications include Real NASCAR: White Lightning, Red Clay, and Big Bill France (University of North Carolina Press, 2010). Pierce earned his PhD from the University of Tennessee.*